The Beginning of Wisdom
Proverbs 1:1-7; 9:10
June 5, 1977

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Exactly ten years ago the educational institutions of this country were in the middle of the greatest crisis they had ever experienced. The memories of that era are still painful: campus revolts, the Free Speech Movement, the burning and trashing of University buildings, and Kent State. Beneath the ferment the whole matter of education - its purpose and goals - was questioned. And beneath that the definition of an educated person came under intense examination. Ten years ago this week Time Magazine reviewed a collection of essays by students at San Francisco State, a center of the general ferment. I clipped and saved it, and as I reread it this week in preparation for this sermon, was struck by the following sentence: "The only one left to believe in is man, so I figure we've got to prepare him for the responsibility of being God." (Time, 6/9/66, p.96).

That, of course, is the clarion call to secularism, in vulgar form. Philosophers and theologians have been talking about it for years. As scientific knowledge about the universe increases, mystery and the unknown decreases - so the argument goes. What humanity used to attribute to the providence of God, is now understood in terms of mathematical probabilities and chemical characteristics. Thus our need for God diminishes in direct proportion to our accumulated knowledge. "God is dead" or at least obsolete, the argument runs. In His place stands the individual human being; proud, in control of his destiny, master of all he or she surveys.

Over against that secular philosophy is the hauntingly familiar sentiment in our Old Testament Lesson this morning; a sentence used by many - perhaps too many - graduating classes as a class motto: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Therein, I would submit, lies a rather substantial conflict: a clear difference between the direction our culture seems to be taking and a traditional tenet of Christian religion. I propose this morning to examine that difference in some detail. The conflict between the new proponents of secular wisdom and the defenders of traditional religion is amplified by the lamentable fact that neither side is comfortable with, nor knows much about, the other. On the one hand religion is regarded with bemused indifference in the halls of academia: a shame too, because it is quite impossible to understand the Western World apart from the heavy influence of Judaism and Christianity. The late Howard Lowry, President of the College of Wooster, said more than the proverbial mouthful when, in an address, he observed: "There are very few vagaries of college students that one, with a little time and patience, cannot understand. But there is one that has always stumped me completely. Why is it that students who will sit up far into the night talking about the philosophy of religion or the psychology of religion and be content to remain in almost abysmal ignorance of the Bible, which is the great original document in these matters? In no other department of learning would such flimsy research procedure be even tolerated." (College Talks, p.7-8).

My own initiation into the conflict came abruptly. After one week at the University of Chicago I had heard so much about two theologians, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, that I concluded that I ought to own one of their books in order to speak the language. Still very new and naive about such matters, I set out one day and happened on a small establishment called the Hyde Park Book Store. The proprietor was what was then known, euphemistically, as a beatnik: beard, beads and sandles; there was a strange, sweet aroma in the air and the books in the window on Zen, Allen Ginsberg, the New Left should have warned me. In any event I asked naively, "Do you have any books by Tillich or Niebuhr?" He flew into a rage,

and allowed as how his was a University book store not a kiddie's library. I was stunned, humiliated and for 18 years I have been composing and recomposing a brilliant rejoinder - which at the moment eluded me altogether.

That is extreme, of course. But academic regard for religion is not always very high. We are, frequently, tolerated but barely. The other side of it is that religion has not been consistently on the side of free and honest academic inquiry. Academics will never forget that it was the Church that forced Galileo to deny what he knew to be scientific fact; that the Church fought for years before agreeing that the earth revolves around the sun and not vice versa. Scientists will never forget that it was the voice of religion that shouted down a young man by the name of Scopes when he tried to teach scientific fact in a Tennessee classroom. Intellectuals can't help but note the heavy religious overtones in the recent effort in West Virginia to dictate what literature English teachers may present. And if that sounds remote, please note that at this moment a well organized effort to force public school teachers to present Genesis 1 and 2 as biology curriculum is succeeding all over the country. It is called Creationism: it tries to make the story of God and humanity into a laboratory science - which it is not. It discredits religion in the process.

There is, in any event, an historical suspicion in the eyes of higher education and religion as they look at each other. The tragedy is that they are not natural enemies: in a very real sense they are both about the same business: they need, I believe, each other very badly.

In a way, we have made education a religion in our culture. Sydney Mead in The Lively Experiment suggests that what emerged from the demise of state religion was state education. We have come to regard education as our salvation, the solution to all our problems and, individually, the passport to the good life. "You must get an education": perhaps the most familiar litany in the American Middle Class. And Why? The answers came too easily, I fear. Because a education will allow you to get a good job and a good job will enable you to earn money and if you have money you'll be happy. The key in education is grades. Grades are the magic door to the right graduate school which, in turn, produces the best job. Educators realize that the total emphasis on grade production has severely weakened the honor system which was based on an older idea that integrity counts for more than class rank. Harpers Magazine published an excerpt from The Chronicle of Higher Education on the subject under the title Grades for Sale. "Near the end of the fall quarter at the University of Denver, Michael Rock walked into the course he was teaching on microeconomic theory and announced that he would auction off grades in the class - for money.

"Although a few students protested, Mr. Rock took in almost $2,000 getting an average of $85 for an A, $55 for a B, and $35 for a C. One student, noticing that several others were absent, bought up all the extra C's and D's and tried to sell them for inflated prices. Mr. Rock took promisory notes from most of the students, but one gave him $80 in cash. A few students said they destroyed term papers and stopped studying after the auction.

"Two days later, Mr. Rock announced to the class that it was all a hoax. "The most depressing thing was to see how easy it was to manipulate them, he said." (Harpers - October 75, Wraparound, p.5).

The behavior of the students, while regrettable, seems to be logical and consistent at least. We have said that happiness depends on money, money obviously

depends on a job, a job depends on a graduate school and graduate school depends on grades. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"? Hardly.

Beyond the competitiveness fostered by our obsession with grades, education faces two other crises that bear heavily on our topic. The first is the "knowledge explosion". My education was not substantially different from my parents'. When I studied mathematics - it was essentially the same math they had studied. In Chemistry, we dealt with the same elements, essentially. In Physics, the same basic concepts maintained. That is no longer true. Within one generation the nature of what is known has increased so much that anyone who has been out of school for a decade doesn't even speak the language. In the sciences, the task simply of keeping up with new research is nearly impossible for any but the full-time scholar. I identified sympathetically with the author of a recent article who confessed his failure to honor an early commitment to keep abreast of what is happening in his field. He had first compromised by reading journal articles rather than scholarly texts, then book reviews of the originals, and is now reduced simply to reading the lists of new titles published in his field.

The only way to cope, apparently, with the knowledge explosion is specialization. Very subtly the definition of an educated person has shifted from the older, rennaissance model of one who has a balanced knowledge in many areas, to the finely trained specialist in a well defined, but narrow field.

The dangers in specialization are obvious. Someone has called it "Majoring in minutae and missing the momentous." But more to the point, as far back as Plato philosophers have known that the specialist mentality can be contrary to a free society. The reason is that the specialist, within the confines of his own area, cannot see and often will not bear responsibility for the entire process. That's what continues to bother the brilliant people who work in nuclear technology. Only at the very highest echelons did the people who worked on the Manhattan Project know that they were building a bomb. And Adolf Eichmann could claim that he was not responsible for killing Jews, merely arranging transportation.

The 19th Century English Poet Shelley once observed: "We have more political and historical knowledge than we can reduce into practice: we have more scientific and economic knowledge than can be accommodated. We want the creative faculty to imagine: our calculations have outrun our conceptions: we have eaten more than we can digest." - a sentiment even more to the point in our generation.

The second great crisis facing education is technology. If specialization is the only way to cope with the knowledge explosion, the technician is the new model of the educated man. We have placed a great deal of faith in technology and the technician. President Kennedy ordered a moon landing within a decade and technology did it in less. Most of us, I presume, still feel that American technology will resolve all the major problems which confront us, such as food, energy and the environment. But the jury is still out - and the scientists are the ones who know that most clearly. In the meantime, the very processes which we hope will solve the problems continue to create new ones. Our dependence on petroleum threatens the ecological balance. Nuclear energy is not the panacea we lay people think it is apparently. And out on the edge, in research with the DNA Molecule and Genetic Engineering, major ethical and moral questions must be confronted.

I am reminded of the importance of the issue every time I visit St. Anthony Hospital here in Columbus. On the wall of the Main Entrance is a stone with an Albert Einstein quotation inscribed. Every time I see it, I'm stimulated: it reads:

"Science without religion is lame.
Religion without science is blind."

And that, I would suggest, is not far from the essence of that ancient proverb with which we began this exercise. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom was a very important word for the ancient Jews. It did not mean knowledge as we use the word. Rather, "wisdom" in the words of one Old Testament commentator, "is the knowledge of how best to conduct oneself in God's world, and action consistent with that knowledge." The Jews collected bits and pieces of this wisdom in single statements called Proverbs: practical advice about how to live life. The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is a major compendium of this wisdom. In our lesson this morning we heard wisdom equated with righteousness, prudence, equality, discretion. These, the Biblical tradition maintains, are the qualities of a truly wise person, a person capable of living faithfully in God's world. It begins with the "Fear of the Lord".

Fear, in this sense, means reverence, awe, wonder. To fear God is, in the Bible, to acknowledge one's creatureliness. It is a way of acknowledging that we are the tenants, not the owners. It is a way of confessing that we are dependent on one greater than ourselves. The Bible proposes that the very foundation of wisdom resides in that fact.

In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we employed the same idiom. The wisdom of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, may appear foolish to the world. But it is the way of life and wholeness and peace and salvation.

When people stop fearing God in that sense; when people forget that all of life is lived out within the sovereignty of Him who created it, things begin to go badly, we believe. That's the problem with secularism. The Jews wrote their history punctuating that point. Life must be lived in harmony with God: His law - His moral imperative - His will. Pure knowledge is not wisdom. The efficiency of the gas chambers of Auschwitz forever proves the point. Technological skill is not wisdom: for the same expertise that may heat our homes one day, thus far has been devoted to weaponry capable of obliterating all life.

At the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the staggering proposition that God is: that we are His: that our lives are a gift and that we are accountable to Him for the way we live them and that we are fully and completely human beings only in relationship with Him.

Our world needs that. Our world needs people who know it. It is the beginning of wisdom.

Amen.

Father, help us to know ourselves as Your children. Keep us from arrogance: grant us faith to acknowledge Your Lordship over all the world and over our lives: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.